

# THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN: ITS INEVITABILITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

by

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**O**n 27 December 1979, following the second assassination of a communist President of Afghanistan in three months, the Soviet Union's armed forces invaded Afghanistan and installed a third communist as President: Babrak Karmal. Within 10 days, 85,000 Soviet troops had occupied the country. By invading Afghanistan the Soviets hoped to put an end to the political-military deterioration which had accelerated with the overthrow of the non-communist regime of Sadar Mohammad Daud in April 1978. Moscow's decision to use force inside this Third World country doubtless followed substantial debate within the Politburo. The Soviet leadership had to weigh the stakes not just in Afghanistan and Southwest Asia, but also with regard to how an invasion would affect detente, other relationships important to the Soviets, and a host of regional issues.

Afghanistan borders the Soviet Union. The country also bordered Tsarist Russia and traditionally provided a land link from China's huge presence in the east and the polyglot collections of tribes and nations of Central Asia to the nations of the Middle East. When viewed from Moscow, Afghanistan occupies a central point in the strategic belt of territory running 3000 miles along the Black Sea, across the Turkish and Iranian frontiers, and on to the mountains and plains

of China. What the West has called the "northern tier," Russia, and then the USSR, has seen as its southern tier,

a line of countries whose international and internal orientation are of prime concern to them, just as much as the politics of the Caribbean and Central American countries are to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Caught between contending powers, Afghanistan has played the role of buffer state for more than a century and a half. During the 19th century, Russia, under the Tsars, sought to expand southward toward the Indian Ocean and its warm-water ports.



<b>Report Documentation Page</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>1982</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1982 to 00-00-1982</b>		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Its Inevitability and Its Consequences</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue ,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>9</b>
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>		

This policy inevitably brought Russian power into collision with British power, England having occupied the Indian subcontinent and having then sought to use Afghanistan as a buffer between the two powers' territorial interests. Continuing Russian probes south in the last half of the 19th century, particularly into Persia but also into Afghanistan, encountered active British resistance. In 1864 the Russian chancellor sought to justify his country's expansion in the following terms: "The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilized states which come into contact with half savage, wandering tribes possessing no fixed social organization." He further explained, "The difficulty is in knowing where to stop."<sup>2</sup> This "difficulty" produced two proxy wars between Russia and England over Afghanistan in the 19th century, the first in 1838, the second in 1878. Indeed, imperialism threatened to produce a major conflict over Afghanistan, but cooler heads prevailed and Afghanistan's boundaries were gradually settled by negotiations between London and Moscow.

When the aftermath of World War I saw the first weakening of the British Empire and a natural slackening of London's interest in Afghanistan, Soviet Russia under Lenin accelerated the Russian policy of southward expansion. Soviet-Afghan and Soviet-Iranian friendship treaties were signed in 1921. Moscow would invoke both these treaties several times, most notably in attempts to dismember Iran in 1944-46 and then, of course, when it invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

Following World War II, Afghanistan gradually became involved in the Cold War as British influence in the country waned and the United States undertook a policy of containment of the Soviet Union. While not making a major commitment to Afghanistan or providing arms aid, the United States did provide economic assistance. The Soviet Union, however, conducted more vigorous foreign aid programs in the area, with India, Burma, and Indonesia, as well as Afghanistan, becoming recipients. By the mid-1960s the Soviet Union had become the primary supplier of arms and aid to Afghanistan, all at favorable loan terms. An Afghan-Soviet

treaty of nonaggression was signed, and Afghanistan's foreign trade became dominated by the USSR.<sup>3</sup> The country was on the threshold of becoming a Soviet client state.

#### SOVIET-AFGHAN RELATIONS

Few Afghan citizens, except communist elements operating in the cities, seem to have wanted Afghanistan to become a Soviet client. The governments in Kabul, which alternated between weak and dictatorial, consistently sought to keep the country independent. King Zahir Shah, monarch from 1933 to 1973, presided over a sociopolitical system based on tribal foundations and titular loyalty to the monarchy. In 1953 the King appointed his cousin, Sadar Mohammad Daud, a royal prince and army officer, as Prime Minister. Opportunistic and flexible, Daud kept Afghanistan's doors open to foreign aid programs, going out of his way in the 1950s to avoid formal commitments to either Moscow or Washington.<sup>4</sup> Daud would be a central figure in Afghan politics for the next 25 years.

As the Cold War intensified in the 1960s, the tempo of political activity inside Afghanistan quickened. Gradually various radical organizations, in particular the communists, emerged from the shadows to become political contenders. Led by two principal operatives, Noor Muhammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal, the communists organized urban dissent, adding to the rising clamor that in 1963 saw the King dismiss Daud as Prime Minister. With Daud out of power, Afghanistan's political pendulum began to swing back and forth. The monarchists, frequently aligned with the army, were unable to contain the left. The centrists, when in power, proved both divided and ineffectual. The left, able to influence cabinet appointments, managed to antagonize both the monarchy and the tribes. Across the border, the Soviets observed the chaos and waited, increasing aid to the army and the security police. The United States also provided economic aid, as did West Germany, China, Britain, and Japan.

In the midst of the mounting turbulence, the communists set in motion plans to bring down the government. The *Khalq*—the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan—was grounded in the urban labor class and the progressive intelligentsia and was led by Taraki. Like the *Tudeh* in Iran, the *Khalq* sought to identify with the masses. Under Taraki the party took a relatively cautious approach to seizing political power. In 1967 elements of the *Khalq* that were frustrated with Taraki and his policies broke off from the party. Led by Karmal, they formed a separate Marxist organization, closely aligned with Moscow, called the *Parcham* Party. More doctrinaire and less nationalistic than Taraki, Karmal and his organization were embraced by Moscow, although the KGB continued to assist the *Khalq*.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing the rise of the communists and the deepening Soviet involvement, King Zahir tried to offset Russian influence with new proposals to the West. Moscow became irritated. In March 1972, the King flew to Moscow to meet with Prime Minister Kosygin. At some point in the talks Kosygin evidently indicated that Afghanistan, by the nature of its geographic location, substantially affected Soviet security. A tranquil border between the two countries was not, said Kosygin, in and of itself sufficient. Reemphasizing Secretary General Brezhnev's proposal for an "all-Asian" security system, Kosygin called for

a 'collective security arrangement' starting with Afghanistan and extending through the vastness of the Asian rimland. Kosygin left little doubt that the Kremlin's perception of its national security in the region began with Afghanistan and radiated out from there to Iran, Pakistan, and India. When the King hesitated to adopt the Soviet proposal, there was little doubt that his problems would multiply.<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Soviet Union, about to assert itself as a global superpower, reapplied the historic Russian policy of empire to its southern border. Afghanistan was trapped.

The King left Moscow with the distinct impression that a *Pax Sovietica* was in the offing. The next year the King's health failed, and in July 1973 the King's cousin and ousted Prime Minister, Mohammed Daud, took power by coup d'état with the support of the communists.<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan began a sharp turn to the left. Seeking to placate the Soviets rather than resist them, Daud also moved to concentrate all power in himself, assuming the titles of President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Defense Minister. Plots were immediately formulated against him. The Prince was riding a tiger.

In June of 1974 the Daud government signed new trade and assistance agreements with Moscow. More Soviet officials and troops entered Afghanistan. At home programs of socioeconomic leveling were ordered: banks were nationalized and landlords persecuted. Government bureaucrats were placed in charge of agricultural cooperatives. Soviet aid reached \$400 million a year.<sup>8</sup> And both the *Khalq* and *Parcham* Marxists recruited relentlessly in the army and the civil service. The *Khalq* even reached out to the Pathan tribes through the activities of a senior operative, Hafizullah Amin. By 1977 the *Khalq* was estimated to have an active membership of at least 25,000; *Parcham* membership was near 10,000.<sup>9</sup>

The showdown between Daud and the communists began in late 1977. As the price of supporting the coup, Daud had brought Marxists into his cabinet. When the alliance unravelled, Daud expelled the Marxists. For this, the *Parcham* and the *Khalq* agreed to eliminate Daud. The Soviets appear to have known of these plans.<sup>10</sup> The communists' opportunity came in April 1978. Using the funeral of an assassinated *Parcham* leader as a pretext, street demonstrations were fomented against the government. Daud ordered the arrest of Taraki, Karmal, and Amin. But important conspirators were left at large, including the deputy chief of the air force, General Abdul Qadir. On the morning of 27 April 1978, air and ground units controlled by the *Parcham* and the *Khalq* moved on Kabul. Qadir ordered air strikes on the presidential palace. That afternoon rebel

forces stormed the building and killed Daud and his family.<sup>11</sup>

The *Khalq* and *Parcham* factions quickly formed a coalition Marxist government with Taraki, head of the *Khalq*, as Prime Minister and Head of State, and Karmal and Amin as Deputy Prime Ministers. The remaining cabinet seats were parcelled out among the factions. Over the next 18 months, each of the three Marxist leaders would plot to kill the other two.

In the early summer of 1978, Taraki and Amin joined forces against the *Parcham* and got Karmal and his deputies out of the country by appointing them as ambassadors, Karmal going to Czechoslovakia. In October Taraki ordered them back to stand trial as traitors, but Karmal remained abroad. With the *Parcham* temporarily neutralized, Taraki and Amin ordered a far-reaching Marxist "renovation" of Afghanistan—extreme economic leveling, proletarian policies in the universities, taxation of the tribes, and atheism as government policy (including the elimination of the Afghan flag and its replacement with a hammer-and-sickle insignia). Opposition was immediate. "Incidents of protest," noted two close observers,

quickly mushroomed into local armed revolts. Government officials became targets for assassination. The most self-defeating aspect of *Khalq*'s program was its failure to give those elements of the population it championed anything they could recognize other than trouble.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the *Khalq*, the professed revolutionary party of the "masses," had in the space of a few months ignited a popular revolt against the revolution.

In February 1979 the American Ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs, was kidnapped by Muslim extremists in Kabul. Government security police, evidently under direct Soviet supervision, stormed the hiding place of the kidnappers, and both Dubs and his captors were killed. In March rebels seized the provincial capital of Herat, killing hundreds of Marxists and Soviet advisors.

Entire units of the Afghan Army defected. As the situation worsened, Amin replaced Taraki as Prime Minister. Alarmed at events, the Soviets increased their presence in the country; by the summer of 1979 over 5000 Soviet troops and advisors were in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

At some point early that summer, Taraki and Amin split bitterly on the question of what should be done. In mid-August Taraki was summoned to Moscow, probably to discuss how to get rid of Amin and regain control. Taraki returned to Kabul to organize a coup. With Soviet support, he reshuffled the government, changing Amin's titles and downgrading his status. Then he applied pressure, through the *Khalq*, on army commanders.<sup>14</sup> The outlines of the Kremlin-Taraki plan evidently looked like this: Amin would be removed, the *Parcham* would come back into the government, and Karmal would be appointed Prime Minister while Taraki would be allowed to retain the post of President. The *Khalq* would be reduced in influence, and efforts would be made to quell the insurgencies. Amin would be made the scapegoat, seized, and executed. Amnesty would be awarded for political detainees and lip service given to Islamic traditions.<sup>15</sup>

The best-laid plans of even the KGB sometimes go astray. And this one certainly did. Amin got word of the plot and escaped, and his supporters trapped Taraki and killed the Afghan President in the fumbled coup attempt. Now on top, Amin declared himself President and applied ruthless measures in

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Kabul and in the countryside. Afghan Army desertions accelerated, the bureaucracy ground to a halt, and the guerrilla freedom fighters grew bolder. Security deteriorated everywhere; Soviet troops were being ambushed at random. Afghanistan seemed about to slip out of Moscow's grasp.

### SOVIET OPTIONS

In deciding what to do about Afghanistan and the Marxist chaos in Kabul, the Soviet leadership had to consider the decision's effect on other important issues:

- Detente and the state of US-Soviet relations as President Carter wrestled with the SALT II Treaty in the Senate.
- The unstable situation in Iran, where Khomeini's Islamic revolution threatened to spill over into the USSR's Central Asian republics.
- Moscow's stake in the Olympic games, and its desire to be the peace-loving host of the summer 1980 event.
- The delicate state of arms-reduction negotiations in Europe.
- The sensitivities of India, Pakistan, and other religious nations of South and Southeast Asia.

With Jimmy Carter ready to run for reelection in the United States against a rising conservative tide led by Republican frontrunner Ronald Reagan, Moscow knew that the direct use of force in Afghanistan would play into Reagan's hands. But the deteriorating situation on the Soviet Union's southern border could not be ignored. The Marxist governments had not pacified the Afghan rebellion. The Chinese and the Pakistanis had been active, stirring up anti-Soviet sentiment and supplying arms. The prospect of another unstable state on her southern border, whether Marxist or not, must have been disturbing to the Politburo. Thus the Brezhnev government reviewed the options in Afghanistan, options already influenced by the investment of Soviet prestige, money, advisors, and the failure—so far—of successive Kabul regimes to bring order out of chaos. The Soviet Union's options were to stick with Amin, to encourage Amin's removal and hope for a

better successor regime, or to remove Amin and set up a new puppet government under the Red Army.

*Option 1: Stick with Amin.* Clearly the situation had deteriorated under Hafizullah Amin. The man was ruthless, a quality prized by the Soviets, but he was using terror in ways that made things worse both in Kabul and in the countryside. The nightly executions in the capital's central prison had not quelled the rebellion. Moreover, Amin was the least predictable of the major Afghan Marxist figures, and his previous connections with the United States were disturbing. He had experience with the tribes, whereas Taraki and Karmal had not, but the tribes were in open revolt against Amin's policies, and soldiers were defecting from the army faster than they could be replaced. Amin himself thoroughly distrusted the Russians. He knew that the Soviets had tried to engineer his overthrow once, and he believed they were actively organizing more plots. From the Soviet viewpoint, then, the man was a dangerous risk, and one that perpetuated a growing country-wide rebellion against Soviet interests.

*Option 2: Abandon Amin and hope for the best.* As Amin became increasingly difficult to deal with, Soviet advisors found him making statements about wanting less Soviet influence in Afghanistan and more contact with the West. Encouraging his removal, or actively engineering it, was simple enough. But who would follow Amin? Taraki was dead, killed by Amin in the backfired coup. Karmal was in Moscow. The *Parcham* and *Khalq* were bitter enemies; dependable, strong leadership was absent. At times the KGB must have had difficulty tracking all the plots and counterplots swirling around Kabul. To get rid of Amin without having another man in the wings ready to take over and follow orders was not the Soviet way. Moreover, such a policy would resemble what the Carter Administration had done with the Shah of Iran—and look what that had gained for Washington! The United States had pulled the rug out from under the Shah, then discouraged the army from taking over, then backed the weak Bakhtiar government. A

month after the Shah quit Teheran, Khomeini was back in country destroying what was left of US influence. Then he seized Carter's diplomats and humiliated the United States. That kind of nonsense would not happen in Kabul. Either Amin would work for the Russians, or he would be removed and someone would be put in who would do the job. Babrak Karmal, waiting in Moscow, was an obvious choice—perhaps the only choice.

*Option 3: Invade.* The last time Soviet armed forces had occupied a Third World country was in Korea when the Japanese collapsed in 1945. They stayed until 1949. The Red Army also had ransacked parts of China and Mongolia during and after the war. They had occupied Azerbaijan in northern Iran between 1944 and 1946, until the United States made them get out. Ending the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and invading Czechoslovakia in 1968 had given the world additional evidence of Moscow's determination not to allow aligned Marxist governments to go under. So precedents for an invasion of Afghanistan existed.

But was Afghanistan, with its shaky governments and chaotic tribes, worth undermining so many other foreign policy interests? The Afghans were a wild, unruly bunch—like the Somalis and Ethiopians, treacherous and feuding. Order could be purchased at the point of a bayonet. But how many Russian casualties would it cost in the process of exterminating the guerrillas, if they could be exterminated? And certainly the Afghan Army would be of no help: it was melting away under the Soviets' noses!

In the United States, President Carter was going to face a tough conservative challenge. To invade would play directly into the hands of Carter's adversaries, and such an act might upset the whole edifice of detente, which the Brezhnev government had worked so hard to erect. Without Carter and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in power, the SALT II Treaty would be finished, thus sidetracking years of effort to induce the Americans into arms agreements beneficial to the Soviet Union. And finally the Moscow Olympic Games were coming up in the summer of 1980. Here was an unparalleled chance for the USSR to play

elaborate peace-loving host to an international event of great importance and pageantry. Thus the Politburo viewed the deterioration of Afghanistan against the backdrop of global strategy and global stakes. It must have been a difficult, far-reaching debate.

## THE SOVIET CHOICE

The decision to invade Afghanistan was probably made in early October 1979, several weeks after Taraki died in the fouled-up coup sponsored by the Soviets. The invasion was meticulously planned. Throughout October and November, President Amin and Soviet officials held heated discussions on the state of affairs in the country. Roads were unsafe; the number of army desertions was enormous; the *Khalq's* "People's Defense Committees" were evaporating, and their weapons were going to the rebels. A Soviet deputy minister of foreign affairs was sent to Kabul to try to persuade Amin to step aside, to be replaced by Karmal, who would request that Soviet divisions be sent in. Amin evidently refused to have any of it.<sup>16</sup> In early December Amin moved his headquarters and security protection to the Darulaman Palace, a move immediately known to the senior KGB officer in country, General Viktor S. Paputin.<sup>17</sup>

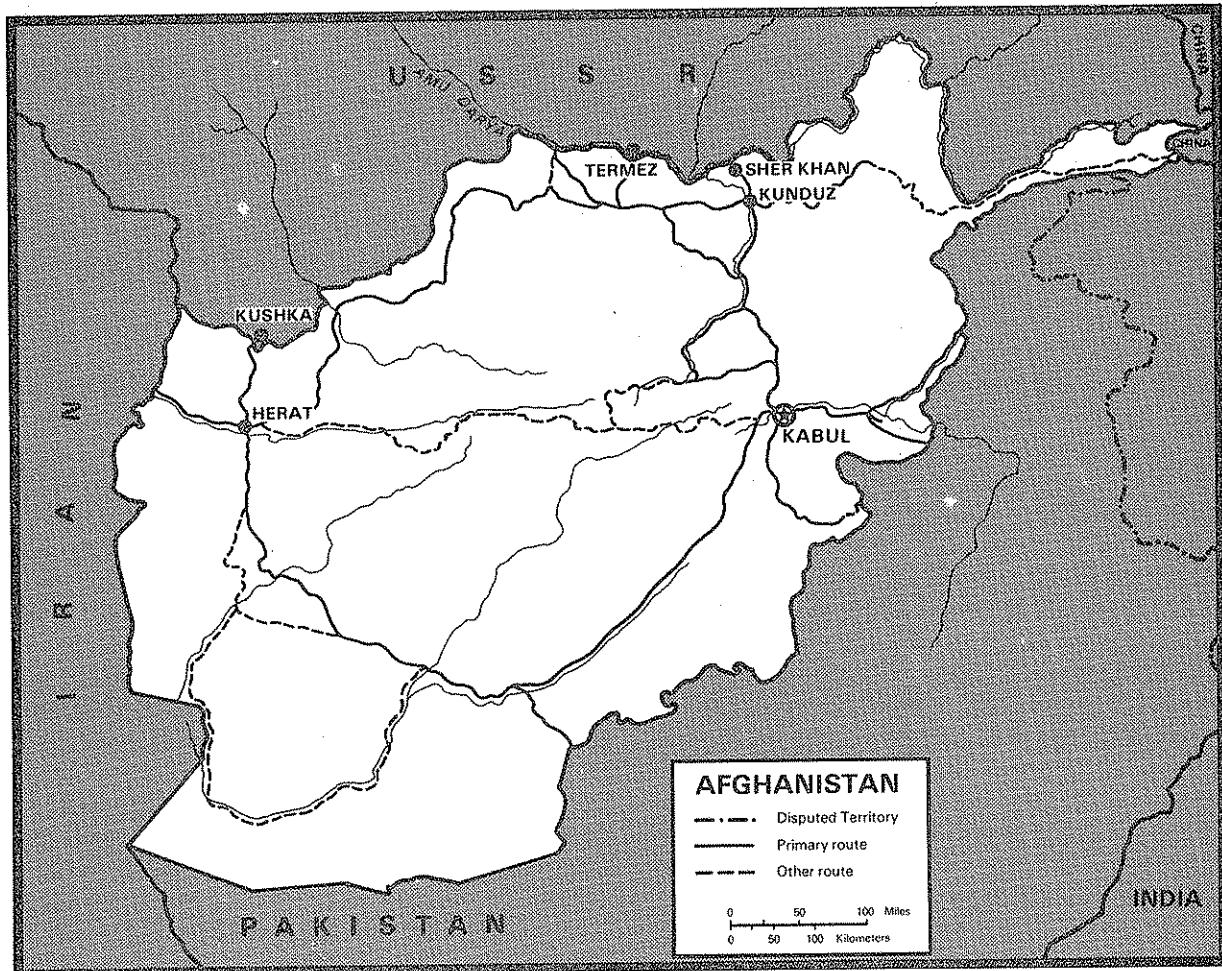
On 17 December, Moscow set the invasion in motion, ordering the elite Soviet 105th Airborne Division to occupy the Kabul airport. On Christmas night came a massive, single-lift operation involving an estimated 280 I1-76, An-22, and An-12 aircraft packed with Soviet troops, munitions, and equipment. Subsequent lifts brought the remainder of the 103d and 104th Airborne Divisions into Afghanistan. On the evening of 27 December, airborne troops occupied Kabul, seized key points, isolated the Amin government, and neutralized what remained of Afghan Army resistance. The 66th and 357th Motorized Rifle Divisions crossed the frontier in the northwest near Kushka and then advanced along the Kushka-Herat highway to seize Herat. The 201st and 306th Divisions invaded Afghanistan in the north through the Amu Darya ports of Termez and

Sher Khan and then sent units down the Kunduz-Kabul road to reinforce Soviet forces in the capital. MiG 21s and MiG 23s provided air support.<sup>18</sup>

On the 27th Amin chose to fight it out. Soviet troops surrounded the Afghan President's offices, attacked, and killed Amin in the firefight. Then came a broadcast of Karmal's voice, ostensibly over Radio Kabul, announcing Amin's overthrow, and Karmal's seizure of the presidency and invitation to the Red Army to stabilize Afghanistan. The broadcast, taped in advance, came from a transmitter in the USSR, most likely in Tashkent.<sup>19</sup> In early January two more Soviet motorized rifle divisions, the 16th and the 54th, were inserted, all forces coming under the command of Marshal Sergei Sokolov, the Soviet First Deputy Defense Minister, who set up field headquarters at Bagram Air Force Base north of Kabul.<sup>20</sup>

## THE OUTCOME

The Soviet invasion has not pacified Afghanistan. Three years after the invasion, the legitimacy of the Karmal regime has yet to be established. The Soviet Army and its Afghan puppet troops control most of Kabul and most of the provincial capitals. The major roads and other communications arteries are kept open with force. But the invasion has not subdued the vast majority of the *mujahidin*—the freedom fighters—despite the guerrillas' serious losses and heavy refugee migration to Pakistan; indeed, the strength of the tribes has increased. They have no central organization, and their weapons come in mainly from China and Pakistan, plus what they capture. But repeated Soviet attempts to capture resistance areas like the Panjsher Valley, the Salang Pass, and the Paghman area have met with



failure. Most of the Hazarajat central highlands remain inaccessible to Soviet troops. The guerrillas have kept Qandahar and Herat in turmoil, and there are gun battles in Kabul.<sup>21</sup> Soviet casualties may well be in the area of 5000 to 8000 out of a total Soviet troop involvement (including rotation) of perhaps 140,000 to 160,000. In an attempt to broaden the regime's appeal, Karmal was divested of the Prime Ministry in early 1981 and replaced by a *Khalq* official.

If Moscow's objective, then, has been to pacify Afghanistan and produce a cohesive socialist government, one whose allegiance to Moscow would approach that of the government of Mongolia or East Germany, for example, then Soviet policy has failed. But perhaps a more valid assessment of the outcome begins by acknowledging that no government in Kabul, whether Afghan or foreign, has ever brought real order to the country. The tribes broker the country's politics, and they have never shown much desire to end their feuding or to relinquish their independence, which often resembles anarchy. Some of the tribes are fiercely Moslem. Others make a show of it. All are hostile to any organized political power radiating from Kabul that infringes on them. Most declare their public hatred of atheism, communism, and the Red Army.

A more valid criterion against which to measure Soviet fortunes would therefore be to ask whether Afghanistan's government today is more sympathetic to Soviet interests and objectives, both internal and external, than it was in the fall of 1979, when Moscow was deliberating whether to invade. If that criterion is applied, then one must acknowledge that Moscow now has on its southern border a government that is docile and formally aligned with the USSR. The Karmal regime "invited" the Soviets in. It "permits" them to station over 100,000 troops, and high-performance aircraft, in the country. It "grants" them unrestricted use of whatever airfields, depots, highways, and cities they can control. From this perspective Moscow has (at substantial costs) obtained its minimum objectives in Afghanistan: A pliant Marxist government has been installed that

permits the Soviets full and unencumbered use of its facilities and votes the party line on all questions of interest to the Soviets. The fear of radical Muslim spillover into the Soviet Union itself has been reduced. The Chinese and Pakistani drive to influence Southwest Asia has been partially blocked. And in placing the Soviets that much closer to the Indian Ocean, with all the geostrategic momentum that that implies, the occupation of Afghanistan is a bold stroke.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

*Lesson 1: Borders are important to the Soviets.* As the largest territorial state in the world, and one whose citizens have known invasions from the east, the south, and the west, stable borders count with the Soviet people and the Soviet government. Moscow's preferred method of tranquilizing its borders is to physically occupy the adjoining areas and establish (initially at least) like-minded governments there—thus the East European, Chinese, Mongolian, and Korean governments. Things do not always work out as planned, however, as the Chinese defection and the Soviet operations to "stabilize" Eastern Europe have shown. Moreover, the region to the south of the USSR allows perhaps the least degree of control and predictability. (The Turks are in NATO; and the Iranians under Khomeini are anti-Russian, as they were under the Shah.) Afghanistan, with its tribes closely related to Soviet peoples, juts into the southern region of the USSR. Thus the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan can be seen as a dramatic, but nevertheless historically routine, application of Russian military force to an unstable border region.

*Lesson 2: When the Soviets place a Marxist government in power, they guarantee Marxism's survival.* And Moscow will back this guarantee even if doing so jeopardizes relations with the West. The reversal of state-imposed socialism is not something that Marx or Lenin acknowledged. Nor is it something that the Soviet Politburo finds acceptable. Proof is seen in the Soviet-forced Polish Army crackdown in Warsaw when Solidarity

gutted the government and the Communist Party lost control, and in the propping up of Fidel Castro in Cuba regardless of cost. Taraki, Amin, and Karmal were Soviet clients, in power at the behest of the Soviets. Each proved unpredictable or weak, prompting Moscow's moves to ensure that Afghanistan's experiment with Marxism would survive.

*Lesson 3: American influence was, and is, limited in Afghanistan.* When President Daud made his sharp turn to the left in 1973-74, effective American influence in Afghanistan ended. The country became a Soviet client moving through successive socialist and Marxist experiments braced by terror and guided by Soviet advisors and pressure. The experiments produced a full-blown popular rebellion. President Carter's alarm at unmasked Soviet intervention when the experiment failed, and his subsequent attempts to orchestrate sanctions against Moscow, did not effectively influence either Russian policy or events in Afghanistan. The various Western half-measures attempted since the invasion—support of Chinese- and Pakistani-directed aid to the guerrillas, sympathy with the Moslem world's condemnation of the invasion, declarations of "Afghanistan Day" in the United States, etc.—have done little to change the situation. The intractable Afghan problem continues, largely unaffected by Western policy, and unresolved by Soviet arms.

#### NOTES

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